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AN INTERESTING AND EXCELLENT ADAPTATION OF FAMILIAR ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

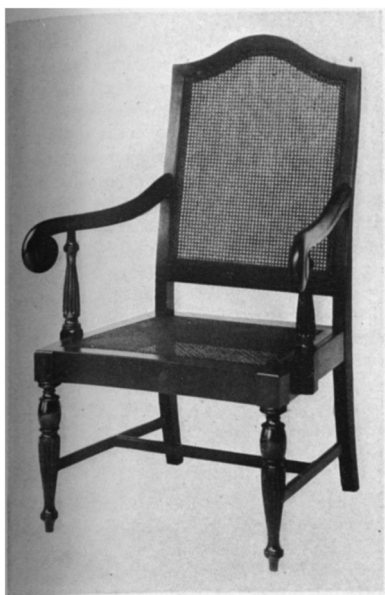
AMERICAN FURNITURE OF TODAY

BY HENRY W. FROHNE

IT is a difficult task to convey in the compass of a brief magazine article any very definite idea to the interested but not specially informed lay public just what is the present status of furniture making in this country as an art industry. The dominant impression with regard to present-day American-made furniture among Americans who are at all able to discriminate between the worthy and the unworthy in matters of artistic aspiration is that the sum total of our efforts in mobiliary achievement is very nearly nil. One might go even farther and say that this impression obtains to almost an equal extent among architects, artists and even among a surprisingly large number of American decorators. The writer, whose interests for a number of years were confined to matters of architectural interest, is free to confess that he was until recently as ignorant of the substantial progress which has been made in American furniture making. There has been a surprising lack of interest in American-made furniture as a result of the impression which has for

some years been spread through many of our popular and technical journals that only antique furniture is worthy of serious consideration, as though the whole evolution of artistic thought had suddenly got it into its head to stand stock still in our generation. Gradually, however, the most inquiring of our architects, our artists and our decorators have realized the danger of spreading such ideas, and they have done everything in their power to gain a saner public interest for the furniture that has been and is being made today in response to an ever more exacting taste.

Anyone who is thoroughly informed as to our attainments in furniture making will be most ready to admit, of course, that the ordinary inexpensive pieces that go by the hundreds of thousands from our factories into the humble abodes of the great furniture buying public are not what even the most tolerant critic of design would pass without severe censure. At the same time while we make such an admission we must also impartially concede that among all this mass of fabricated



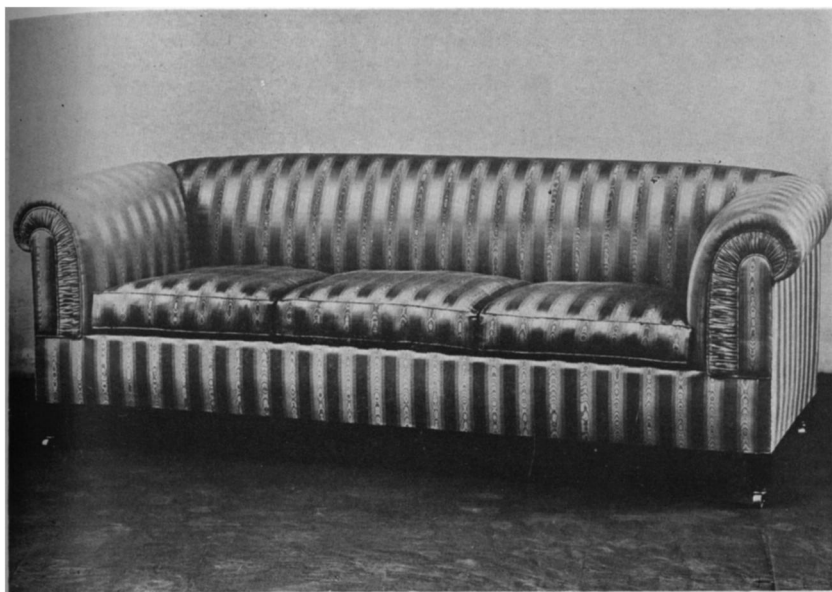
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material, there is a rapidly increasing number of pieces possessing distinct merit as efforts of design. Also, one cannot state too strongly that even the furniture obtainable today in almost any section of our broad land by our great middle class is distinctly superior in point of durability and suitability to its surroundings and use than was the case a decade ago. At a gathering of distinguished artists, craftsmen, manufacturers and merchants recently assembled in New York City, an American artist of distinguished attainment in his field made a plea for better designed, plainer furniture for the poor American family. He evidently was not informed as to how much has already been done to accomplish that very object. He expressed, however, a thought which we thinking Americans may well take to heart. If interest in their furniture for its own sake, for its inherent beauty and adaptability, were more often in their minds when they are engaged in furnishing their homes rather than the alleged historic association of its design, there would be a great deal more good furniture to be had by the American family of limited means. Our furniture merchants, also, are to blame for setting up false standards in the public mind and thereby perverting the desire for things that are good *per se* instead of lending their powerful influence in bringing about a more rapid education of public taste in matters of furniture and home furnishings. Again this regrettable failing of the American merchant "to do the business" has its deleterious effect upon the manufacturer who generally possesses a great deal more appreciation of what is right and useful than he permits his products to display, fearing that, if he allows his better judgment to govern his output, he may be reaching beyond his most profitable market, the average of public taste.

If present tendencies are any criterion we may soon expect to witness the phenomenon of a standardization of designs for our furniture. We may, at the same time, also expect to find our most capable designers engaged in creating the pieces of modest price which command the widest market instead of those of inferior capacity as is now unfortunately the rule.

There is, perhaps, no single factor which will do more to hasten this much to be desired consummation than the exaltation of the designer as an element of the first importance in announcing to the public the merit of an article. It is a great defect of our system of distribution that our merchants and our manufacturers are so often unwilling to dim the lustre of their own commercial glamor by giving due credit to the creative minds they employ to ennoble the materials which they work and which they dispense. There can be no object of utility however insignificant on which the thoughtful endeavor of some trained mind has been engaged which does not gain immeasurably in the pleasure it gives if the user has brought to his notice the identity of its creator, while the name of its manufacturer or its distributor contributes little to its real interest.

Of more expensive furniture for which there must naturally always be a more restricted demand, this country is producing, today, a great deal and, perhaps, of as good quality as regards design and of superior merit as regards construction and general execution—to be obtained anywhere in the world's greatest cabinetmaking centers. Furniture of this kind is finding its way, more and more, into the ordinary channels of trade. The dealer in genuine antiques has passed into history and the rare pieces formerly to be found in his musty old shop have found safe refuge in our Museums and in private collections. In his place has come the specialist in fine furniture, and to keep him supplied with wares the custom furniture factory, of which the proprietor is generally a person of artistic culture and appreciation who employs largely foreign craftsmen to execute his designs in limited quantities. Through these agencies, which have been called into being largely through the splendid educational work that is being done by many of our architects and decorators, one may obtain practically any article of new furniture which could be had a couple of decades ago only from abroad. Of course not all the furniture which comes out of these factories is good in design any more than are all the designs which issue from the offices of American architects. The standard of performance, however,



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from every standpoint, is generally high and the needs of all degrees of cultivated taste may readily be supplied if one be properly advised. Then, too, our architects are taking a stronger personal interest in furniture and their services are more frequently being demanded by clients whose exacting demands the ready-made market refuses to satisfy. Through this means the standard of design for the more expensive kind of furniture is being constantly raised and this in itself cannot but react favorably on the general design of all American-made

furniture. Perhaps our most lamentable deficiency in the mobiliary art is our lack of native skilled craftsmen and of a system from which succeeding generations may hope to draw them. Talented artists America now possesses in abundance and their interest in the art industry will, doubtless, come in time; our crying need is an educational system sufficiently broad to provide in greater number and variety the needed skilled workers, and a system of distribution which will have for its motto "the public be educated" in art.

THE GOOD FURNITURE ROOM

THE room illustrated on the opposite page was one of the chief features of the exhibition of American Industrial Art set forth in the National Museum from May to September, under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts. This room was arranged as an exhibit by the editors of *Good Furniture*. In it the co-operation was complete, the result was not a mere room but a collective exhibit by thirty-five different exhibitors. This meant that personal and private interest were merged in the welfare of all and a vital principle, that of cooperation in such work, was admirably illustrated.

Artists, craftsmen and manufacturers placed at the disposal of those who had the work in charge the best of their production; and carpenters, upholsterers and workmen gave cheerful and intelligent aid in combining and arranging the exhibit. The general plan was drawn up by Mr. Henry W. Frohne, the Editor of *Good Furniture*, in Grand Rapids and the work was carried out in Washington under the immediate direction and skillful supervision of Mr. William Laurel Harris, of New York. The room was not either of a design or proportion peculiarly adapted to the purpose to which it was put, but these obstacles to effect were overcome and the room possessed a peculiarly livable quality.

Everything in the room was made in America and was displayed in relationship to other manufactures for uses which were originally intended. It was this that gave

to each exhibit new meaning and significance.

The room as a whole has been set up anew in the Avery Library at Columbia University, where the lesson it taught and the work it illustrated will be still more widely dissimulated. The fact is, however, that during the summer months while it was on view in the National Museum at Washington, this room, as a part of the Industrial Art Exhibit, was visited by thousands of persons from all over the United States.

The general tone of the room was a golden brown on a cool gray plaster wall. The dominant effect was obtained through the use of silks with woven tapestries and panels of richly tooled leather, painted and gilded. On these deep warm tones the objects of art in bronze, pottery and fabril glass took on an added lustre and manifested a singular charm. There was a note of sumptuousness and also of comfort.

All of the furniture in the room was made in Grand Rapids. There were rugs on the floor of interesting design and quality. There were pictures on the walls by American artists of note; there were tablecovers and scarfs as well as embroidered fire screens by skillful craftswomen. Here and there a small bronze was to be seen by an accomplished sculptor. It has been truly said that this room represented an idea and a principle. The idea was that of intelligent and effective cooperation for common good; the principle, what one man can not do a group of men can do.